

# Opinion How the Trump administration is turning legal immigrants into undocumented ones



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The Trump administration is turning legal immigrants into undocumented ones.

That is, the “show me your papers” administration has literally switched off printers needed to generate those “papers.”

Without telling Congress, the administration has scaled back the printing of documents it has already promised to immigrants — including green cards, the wallet-size I.D.’s legal permanent residents must carry everywhere to prove they are in the United States lawfully.

In mid-June, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services’ contract ended with the company that had been printing these documents. Production was slated to be insourced, but “the agency’s financial situation,” USCIS said Thursday, prompted a hiring freeze that required it to ratchet down printing.

Of the two facilities where these credentials were printed, one, in Corbin, Ky., shut down production three weeks ago. The other facility, in Lee’s Summit, Mo., appears to be operating at reduced capacity.

Some 50,000 green cards and 75,000 other employment authorization documents promised to immigrants haven’t been printed, USCIS said in a statement. The agency said it had planned to escalate printing but that it “cannot speculate on future projections of processing times.” In the event of furloughs — which the agency has threatened if it does not get a \$1.2 billion loan from Congress — “all agency operations will be affected.”



Some of the missing green cards are for immigrants newly approved for legal permanent residency. Others are for existing permanent residents who periodically must renew their identity cards, which expire every 10 years but sometimes must be replaced sooner (for example, if lost). These immigrants have completed every interview, required biometric assessment, cleared other hurdles — and often waited years for these critical credentials.

The Immigration and Nationality Act requires every adult legal permanent resident to carry their green card “at all times.” Failing to carry it is a misdemeanor, subject to jail time or fines. Immigrants must also show their green card to apply for jobs, travel or reenter the United States.

Understandably, panicked immigrants have been inundating USCIS with calls seeking to locate their documents.

“Our volume of inquiries [has] spiked concerning cases being approved, but the cards [are] not being produced,” said one agency employee. “A lot are expedite requests, and we can’t do anything about it; it’s costing people jobs and undue stress.”

This employee added: “It really does frustrate a lot of us to not let applicants know what’s really going on.”

Normally, within 48 hours of an applicant’s approval, USCIS’s online system indicates that a card has been printed. Immigration attorneys across the country have been puzzled recently because these status updates never appeared. Many thought the delays were tied to covid-19, which has caused other service disruptions.

One Philadelphia attorney, Anu Nair, said a USCIS officer let slip in early June that all contractors were about to be laid off and to expect long delays with paperwork.

Memphis-based attorney Elissa Taub inquired about her client’s missing green card and got a cryptic email: “The system has to be updated so that a card can be produced. You will receive the [card] in the mail once the system is updated [sic].”

USCIS, which is funded almost entirely by fees, is undergoing a budget crisis, largely caused by financial mismanagement by political leadership. The printing disruptions are no doubt a preview of chaos to come if the agency furloughs about 70 percent of its workforce, as it has said it will do in a few weeks absent a congressional bailout.

In recent conversations with congressional staffers about cutting contracts to save money, USCIS mentioned only one contract, for a different division, that was being reduced — and made no reference to this printing contract, according to a person who took part in those discussions. The company that had this contract, Logistics Systems Inc., did not respond to emails and calls this week requesting comment.

The administration has taken other steps in recent months that curb immigration. Presidential executive orders have almost entirely ended issuance of green cards and work-based visas for people applying from outside the country; red tape and bureaucracy have slowed the process for those applying from within U.S. borders. For a while, the agency refused to forward files from one office to another. The centers that collect necessary biometric data remain shuttered.

These pipeline delays are likely to dramatically reduce the number of green cards ultimately approved and issued this year.

Under normal circumstances, immigrants who need proof of legal residency but haven't yet received their green card would have an alternative: get a special passport stamp from USCIS. But amid covid-related changes, applicants must provide evidence of a "critical need," with little guidance about what that means.

"The bottom line is that applicants pay huge filing fees, and it appears that these fees have apparently been either squandered through mismanagement or diverted to enforcement-focused initiatives, to the great detriment of applicants as well as the overall efficiency of the immigration process," says Anis Saleh, an immigration attorney in Coral Gables, Fla. "The administration has accomplished its goal of shutting down legal immigration without actually changing the law."

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